

I'VE BEEN SHOUTING for a long time now that the majority of today's players, and particularly in Division One, are grossly over-estimated, and even more overpaid.

And I reckon some of the FA Cup results have proved pretty conclusively that I am right. And I say that in the full knowledge that Cup football is very unpredictable.

Nevertheless results in some cases over two games following a draw in the first, indicate pretty clearly that there is a great levelling out process taking place and regrettably that doesn't mean that the non-League and lower Division club players are getting better, but simply that the standard at the top is distinctly on the decline.



I hesitate to think how much Tommy Docherty has spent in building his Manchester United side yet they were held to a draw at Old Trafford on Saturday and were beaten 3-2 in the replay at Walsall by a team which cost "a song" and a club which is very near to bankruptcy, losing between four and five hundred pounds a week.

According to all the Press reports in neither game, did little Walsall resort to a defensive pattern but played United at football and won.

The same was written of the ties' most remarkable upset, little Wimbledon's 1-0 victory over Division One Burnley at Turf Moor.

Wimbledon were reported as being the better side on the day. Northern Premier League side Stafford Rangers drew with Rotherham at Stafford on Saturday, and then had the audacity to win the replay at Rotherham by 2-0, and were the better side on both occasions we are told.

Altrincham, also from the Northern Premier League, gave mighty (and mighty expensive) Everton a real going over at Goodison Park last Saturday and should have won there and then.

Even after giving Everton an advantage by playing the replay on Old Trafford as opposed to their own smaller pitch, the Premier League side, were just as good as their exalted opponents, but lost the tie on two silly defensive mistakes. It was emphasised in reports that Everton were never better from a pure football point of view, but had just the edge purely on fitness.



Then, of course Leatherhead made Brighton look like woodenheads by beating them 1-0 at Brighton before 20,000 spectators.

Ramour has it that the Brighton directors withheld the sticks of rock they were going to present to the non-League to use against manager Peter Taylor and his players. Well maybe they just got a rock-et instead! Brighton, by the way, have one of the costliest teams in Division Three.

Last of all, but by no means least performance-wise, Wycombe Wanderers held the Boro to a draw at Wycombe last Saturday — and the Boro are joint leaders of Division One.

According to some of you lads I've talked to who went to Wycombe, they say the shoe was on the other foot, it was the Boro who held on to the draw. There was a lot of the blame for that laid on the slope on the Wycombe pitch, but in all honesty, in the replay on Tuesday evening there

**GEORGE
HARDWICK says**

LEAGUE SOCCER ON THE DECLINE

The main difference really was — as in the case of Altrincham against Everton — largely in the fitness of the full-time professionals, for it wasn't until the last 15 minutes that the Boro looked to have the game won and then, but for good goalkeeping and bad finishing, they might have had three goals.

It would have been a false result though, for the Ayresome lads were never three goals better than their opponents, and even after David Armstrong's goal, Wycombe managed enough knowhow to get through the Boro's real strength, their defence. And had both their strikers not been so leg-weary, either might have made the four or five feet necessary to put in a simple equaliser.



Player for player there was certainly not a great deal of difference, certainly not six leagues, which is the factual situation.

There were certain players in the Wycombe outfit I would have been pleased to see in a Boro shirt, and as a team they moved so very neatly at times, were accurate in their passing, progressive in their movement, and ran very sensibly off the ball.

Although David Mills missed a good chance very early in the game (but it was a lucky break that gave him the



JIM PLATT—two best saves

saves of the first-half and never at any time did the part-timers look overawed by the high-flying Division One Boro.

Individually and collectively in a football sense they were never inferior, it was purely in fitness and stamina where they were beaten.

All the evidence is there and it is damning as far as football at the top and its footballers go.

No longer do the English League's Division I and II stand out head and shoulders above all, and daft as it may seem, it may not be too long before a non-League side does actually get to an FA Cup final, especially if the players do succeed in getting this looked for freedom at the termination of each contract.